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Responses

Universal Basic Income

The Organic and the Conjunctural in Historicizing Basic Income: Response to Zamora and Jäger

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ABSTRACT In response to Zamora and Jäger's intellectual history critique of my original essay, I reiterate the methodological necessity of grounding a historical study of basic income in a Marxist framework that considers both the organic and conjunctural. This approach illuminates the complexities of basic income as common sense under capitalism while illustrating the limits and opportunities for Left organizing around the idea of basic income.

Daniel Zamora and Anton Jäger responded to my [original essay](#) with a succinct [intellectual history](#) of a specific conjuncture from approximately the 1930s to the early 1960s that contained a dominant and emergent set of ideas about social justice. First, Zamora and Jäger note that during this period the dominant conception of social justice in public debates on addressing poverty was defined as an expansive welfare state that provided programs addressing healthcare, education, food, and housing as the social rights of citizens. According to Zamora and Jäger, while basic income plans were also suggested, it was always in addition to proposals for an expansive welfare state and often tied to full employment schemes. Second, a set of ideas began to take form during this period that subsequently became dominant from the mid-to-late 1960s into the present. For Zamora and Jäger, this shift primarily involved the ascent of the notion that the price system, rather than the state, ought to be the central mechanism for redistributing goods in a society. Based on this logic, policies addressing poverty therefore needed to guarantee access to the market via strict cash transfers that wouldn't disrupt market forces, such as Milton Friedman's proposal for a Negative Income Tax, which lacked work guarantees provided by the state. Zamora and Jäger conclude their response by pointing out that this ascending neoliberalism dramatically altered the meaning of social justice and that this meaning is still with us today. As evidence, Zamora and Jäger point to contemporary proposals for a basic income based on strict cash transfers that are coupled with the continued dismantling of government services, like Governor Mike Dunleavy's proposal to modify the Alaska Permanent Fund.

Zamora and Jäger's conjunctural analysis is intended to service a perceived deficiency in my argument, namely my claim that basic income is "common sense." As Zamora and Jäger argue in their response, "stating [that basic income is common sense] overlooks the entire intellectual history of the idea, and how the proposal only became 'common sense' after conceptions of work, poverty, social justice, redistribution or the state underwent some drastic changes . . . As leftists, our job should be to denaturalize power relations and not always take for granted what passes as 'common sense.'"¹ Based on Zamora and Jäger's operationalization of the term "common sense"—which, based on their usage in their

response I interpret to mean the ideas that become internalized as self-evident and natural truths over time—I find no general fault with their argument that leftists should denaturalize power relations. However, this is not the definition of “common sense” that I used in my original essay, and consequently my argument leads to a different conclusion than the one Zamora and Jäger reach.

In my essay, I used a Gramscian definition which holds that common sense is made up of contradictory tendencies with a variety of origins.² For instance, objective thought forms originate from the lived material experiences of individuals who are embedded in capitalist social relations. As they labor, they constitute the corresponding form of consciousness that emerges from these social relations as a part of common sense. Although capitalist social relations give rise to reified expressions of human labor, workers nonetheless experience these reified expressions objectively in their direct experiences as workers, rather than as a form of false consciousness. Common sense is also made up of “good sense,” which involves creative and experimental ideas based on reason, self-reflection, empiricism, and logic, rather than emotion, instinct, or group-think. Finally, common sense entails ideas and embodied practices that originate from ideological state apparatuses such as the education system, the church, the culture industries, and so forth. Thus, common sense is an incoherent and historically specific assemblage of ideas and practices.

This is hardly a definition that takes for granted what passes for common sense or risks falling into an “empty transhistorical celebration.”³ Indeed, the strength of using a Gramscian definition of common sense is that it allows room for the kind of conjunctural analysis and intellectual history that Zamora and Jäger provide to be integrated into a larger historical framework that allows us to better “denaturalize power relations . . . [and] begin to challenge it based on this knowledge.”⁴ As my essay and [introduction to the forum](#) argue, various forms of the state wage have been proposed and enacted as long as capitalism has existed, and the relationship between the two is more than a coincidence since crises of social reproduction emerge when the economic contradiction between wages and the surplus of workers is intensified. Furthermore, I suggested that there was a specific economic crisis of social reproduction that maps with the conjuncture Zamora and Jäger’s argument about the discursive changes in language over social justice exists within. In other words, integrating my historical analysis of the enduring structural relationship between capitalism and basic income as an objective thought form and my argument about the crisis of social reproduction with Zamora and Jäger’s conjunctural explanation of shifting definitions about basic income and social justice would help facilitate a materialist explanation for why, in this intellectual history Zamora and Jäger give us, ideas changed the way that they did. As Gramsci noted, if an analysis does not situate the intellectual history of an idea into a dialectical dependency on the structural or organic logic of capitalism, immediate causes are treated as the only effective ones, resulting in an excess of ideologism.⁵ Indeed, as I suggest below, there is a steep price to pay in exchange for the excess of ideologism that often accompanies intellectual histories. In order to minimize repeating arguments from my original essay in their entirety, I would like to briefly mention two interrelated points that are worth returning to if we wish to challenge common sense understandings of basic income.

My first point is about social movements. Zamora and Jäger conclude their response with the assertion that once we recognize how the meaning of basic income changed over time, we can then challenge these proposals based on this knowledge. This notion seems too close to the problem I previously mentioned in my essay about how objective thought forms are embedded in common sense. Although any ideology critique that shows the historicity of a given concept or idea is an important achievement, it by no means banishes

the weight of these mystifications in the minds of individuals so long as they are anchored in real economic relationships as objective thought forms. In short, transcending objective thought forms requires more than understanding the historicity of a concept. I theorized basic income as a state wage parallel to the wage form of the market, and similarly supported and critiqued how social movements often fight over wage levels within the confines of the wage form. What I argued in my essay is that moments of good sense need to be extracted from the incoherence of common sense and linked together with narratives already used by social movements that advocate for reforms on the level of the objective thought form, such as wage increases—and for our purposes, a basic income—in order to transcend the objective thought form itself. This is why I advocated that the notion of “surplus” from arguments for basic income be put in motion with the concept of surplus populations.

While the period Zamora and Jäger examine in their response contained many progressive policy ideas developed by economists, historians, and politicians that were implemented in some form by the state, it should not be forgotten that the state itself was also pressured by various social movements that had their own ideas about what a more just society should look like, ideas which did not necessarily include maintaining a capitalist state.⁶ Thus, my essay focuses on the centrality of struggle “from below” and proposes meeting social movements where they are at by suggesting how they can realign their goals via the concept of surplus in order to transcend the state wage form, i.e. basic income. This is clearly not advocacy for a “spontaneously legitimate demand,” as Zamora and Jäger have characterized my argument, but something altogether more nuanced.

Second, my argument about surplus is also an argument about how the state is a capitalist state and not just a state under capitalism. This distinction is important because while the capitalist state maintains a relative autonomy in relation to the social totality that allows for progressive social reforms to be negotiated and enacted, it is nonetheless also true that the capitalist state is essential to the reproduction of capitalism.⁷ This is what my essay addresses via the concept of surplus populations. I have already recapitulated this concept’s relevance to the present conjuncture by drawing upon Endnotes’ excellent work on the subject in my original essay.⁸ But another example, this time from *Capital, Volume 1*, might also help illuminate the centrality of the capitalist state’s role in ensuring surplus populations in its quest to reproduce capitalism. In the last chapter of the final section of *Capital, Volume 1*, Marx notes how the availability of land in the colonies of Western Europe (made available through the violence of colonialism) were used by workers to escape the horrors of wage labor in the factory back home. As Marx correctly pointed out, this created a problem for capital:












The great beauty of capitalist production consists in this, that it not only constantly reproduces the wage-labourer as a wage labourer, but also produces a relative surplus population of wage-labourers in proportion to the accumulation of capital . . . But in the colonies this beautiful illusion is torn aside. There, the absolute numbers of the population increase much more quickly than in the mother country, because many workers enter the colonial world as ready-made adults, and still the labour-market is always understocked. The law of the supply and demand of labour collapses completely.⁹

In short, so long as workers can own land and produce for themselves, capitalist accumulation is extremely difficult. In any case, Marx illustrates the problem of “the anti-capitalist cancer of the colonies” in order to emphasize how the capitalist state ends up solving it, which is to set an artificially high price on the land independent of supply and demand. This effectively compels the immigrant worker to toil in the factory for wage labor so that they can eventually earn enough to buy their own land. Finally, the mass

importation of “paupers from Europe into the colonies” keeps the wage-labor market full for the capitalists, which necessarily includes a floating surplus population to keep pressure on employed laborers.¹⁰ And so it ever has been under capital. As a consequence, no amount of welfare policy reform intended to curtail the space in which market competition exists can address the problem of surplus populations since it is integral to the functioning of capitalism. But this is precisely the appeal a basic income has as an objective thought form, since it is often framed as a promissory note to exit the labor market, if only provisionally. Therefore, a linkage of the concept of surplus to surplus populations offers an opportunity for the development of class consciousness against capitalism and the capitalist state. Relatedly, as my brief summary of Marx’s final chapter about faraway colonies suggests, capitalism is a global system. As such, any “national” welfare policy ought to exceed the confines of the nation-state in solidarity with a global surplus population, a point I stressed in my essay. Perhaps another nugget of good sense that can be extracted from the common sense of universal basic income is that we as leftists need to take literally what it means to have a universal welfare program.

Finally, I would like to reiterate that, as I have demonstrated above and in my original essay, the strength of a Marxist analysis is that it reveals the ways that a social formation is conditioned by the invariant and organic features of a dominant mode of production. This methodological principle of starting from the totality matters because as left scholars our political strategies flow from our analyses and incomplete analyses lead to incomplete political strategies. While conjunctural intellectual histories are useful, they can only lead to limited political strategies if they are not fully situated within an order of determinations that range from the local all the way to the most abstract level of generality.¹¹ This is why I originally chose to analyze basic income from the vantage point of “ideology from below” in the capitalist mode of production rather than as a conjunctural phenomenon. I look forward to Zamora and Jäger’s forthcoming book on the intellectual history of basic income and hope that they have anticipated some of these critiques in their work.

Notes

1. Daniel Zamora and Anton Jäger, “Historicizing Basic Income: Response to David Zeglen,” *Lateral* 8, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.8>. 
2. See Jan Rehmann’s *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013) for a full account of how common sense is the nexus of contradictory tendencies from above and below. 
3. Zamora and Jäger, “Historicizing Basic Income.” 
4. Zamora and Jäger, “Historicizing Basic Income.” 
5. Antonio Gramsci, *The Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 201. 
6. Steve Fraser, “The New Deal in the American Political Imagination,” *Jacobin*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/06/new-deal-great-depression>. 
7. Neil Davidson, “The Necessity of Multiple Nation-States for Capital,” *Rethinking Marxism* 24, no. 1 (2012): 26–46. 
8. Endnotes Collective, *Endnotes 4: Unity in Separation* (London: Endnotes, 2015), 155–157. 
9. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1990), 935–936. 
10. Marx, *Capital*, 938–940. 
11. Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 88–96. 

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David Zeglen is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at George Mason University. For his dissertation, he is researching the applicability of Trotsky's concept of uneven and combined development as a theory of cultural globalization. He is currently co-editing a special issue of *Celebrity Studies* with Neil Ewen on right-wing populist celebrity politicians in Europe due out in 2020.



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